

50 years later, Earth Day still 'up to you' Experts: Individual action will shape environment's future

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Body

BLOOMINGTON — Fifty years ago, students in a Bloomington High School biology class had a “memorial service” for planet Earth.

The date of death was listed as “It’s up to you.”

That still holds true, five decades after the first Earth Day, which now is celebrated annually on April 22.

“People do quite often get disillusioned about their own ability to make a difference,” said Michael Brown, executive director of the Ecology Action Center in Normal. “We can’t overlook the impact of individual action.”

Recycling paper, cans and plastic; planting native species in your yard; conserving water by using rain barrels; and using your own reusable cloth bags while shopping are among ways people can make a difference.

“Our decisions make a difference,” said Myra Gordon of Normal, the original leader of Operation Recycle, which later became the Ecology Action Center.

She suggests paying attention to details, such as energy efficiency ratings on appliances, and getting an energy audit through the Ecology Action Center to find ways to make your home more energy efficient.

“These are some of the things we can all explore,” said Gordon.

Fifty years ago, Earth Day “teach-ins” took place across the country, including multi-day programs at Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan universities.

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This year, the coronavirus epidemic canceled many Earth Day events, but the Ecology Action Center has put together a full slate of activities in the “virtual” world.

“It should be a fun little program,” said Brown.

In 1990, the celebration of Earth Day’s 20th anniversary triggered “a new resurgence and launched a new generation” interested in the environment, he said.

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"That was my first real Earth Day. It helped motivate me and inspired me to pursue the path I have," said Brown, who has been EAC's executive director since 2007. Before that, he served in the Peace Corps, trained volunteers in ecological monitoring for the Illinois EcoWatch and helped with restoration of natural areas for Peoria Wilds.

The first Earth Day was "a monumental event that truly launched the environmental movement," said Brown.

Laws such as the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and Endangered Species Act have improved air and water quality and brought back species that were once at risk of extinction.

In 1980, there was only one nesting pair of bald eagles in Illinois. Today, in McLean County alone, there are six known eagle nests among hundreds around the state.

Recycling of newspapers and aluminum cans, once an occasional project of Boy Scout troops, churches or other organizations, is handled with regular curbside pickup by Bloomington, Normal and many other municipalities.

Wind turbines dot the Central Illinois landscape, including the Heartland Community College campus. Lincoln College has installed solar panels. Rivian will soon manufacture electric vehicles in Bloomington-Normal.

But there is still more work to be done, say Brown, Gordon and Angelo Capparella, an Illinois State University professor and environmental biologist.

Scientists are doing a good job of identifying problems and ways to address them, said Capparella, but "in terms of actually implementing changes, we're moving backwards."

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He pointed to relaxation of requirements for environmental impact assessments and lack of action on climate change as two examples. Other deregulation efforts include weakening protections under the Migratory Bird Act and backing away from strict vehicle emission standards.

"Until people agree there is a problem, there's no way to solve a problem," he said.

"Instead of being reactive, we need to be proactive" and not wait "until this thing slaps us in the face," said Capparella.

Young people have been an important part of the environmental movement since the beginning.

Gordon recalls watching "kids dragging their little red wagons" to bring cans for recycling.

"We're seeing leadership from young people. Greta Thunberg is one example," said Brown, citing the climate change activist from Sweden.

"We need new ideas. We need new perspectives. Clearly, we haven't done enough so far," he said.

Brown is hopeful there can be "a new resurgence so we can, once and for all, address climate change and make a difference."

EAC hosts online Earth Day celebration

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